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Amid budget cuts, panel urges social ministries to refocus efforts

Cole Stangler | Feb. 15, 2011

Kathy Saile, Ellen Nissenbaum, Nina Valmonte and Jesuit Fr. Fred Kammer speak during a panel discussion at the 2011 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington yesterday. (NCR photo/Cole Stangler)

WASHINGTON -- Impending budget cuts and fiscal austerity measures -- whether they appear in President Obama's 2012 federal budget proposal or in a counterproposal supported by Congressional Republicans -- were an important theme Monday morning for a panel of national Catholic leaders discussing the state of poverty in the United States.

Part of the 2011 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, a four-day annual gathering of more than 300 social ministry workers from around the country, the panel focused on practical ways to combat poverty and discussed public policies that create a more equitable economy.

The group agreed unanimously that any budget cuts need to avoid targeting those who depend on them the most.

Moderated by Kathy Saile, director of the U.S. bishops' conference office of domestic social development, the panel also included Jesuit Fr. Fred Kammer, director of the Jesuit Social Research Center; Ellen Nissenbaum, legislative director of the Center on Budget & Policy Priorities; and Nina Valmonte, director for parish and community outreach and services for Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens.

Obama released his 2012 federal budget on Monday. The $3.7 trillion proposal trims or terminates more than 200 federal programs next year -- many of which are supported by Catholic agencies ?- and makes key investments in education, transportation and research.

The president said the plan is aimed at boosting the nation's economy while reducing record budget deficits.

Monday's panel discussion included a look at the different forms of poverty across the nation. Valmonte and Kammer, from New York City and New Orleans respectively, offered their own distinctive experiences.

?The face of poverty is really the face of the immigrant,? Valmonte noted, referencing the difficulties posed by language barriers, legal status, lack of skilled labor, and the high cost of living in New York City.

For Kammer, who works in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama -- some of the most impoverished states in the nation -- poverty has a clear racial dimension.

In her remarks, Nissenbaum drew attention to ?the other side of poverty? that is income inequality -- criticizing the enormous disparity between income gains of the top 1 percent versus the bottom quintile since 1979.

?If people were paying their fair share of taxes, if income was divided more readily, if poor people were being paid more, we?d see some changes and some really important changes in peoples? lives,? Kammer said.

Another key theme was contesting the notion that poverty can be overcome individually.

?We hear people who say individual responsibility as though the poor chose to be in poverty,? Valmonte said. ?For the most part, it?s the structure that keeps them in poverty.?

Kammer drew attention to several ?mythologies? that have prevented poverty from being combated -- the practice of blaming the poor, the notion that ?everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps,? the idea that government is ineffective, Social Security is bankrupt, taxes are too high, and that charities and churches can ?pick up the slack?.

?We have to re-mythologize,? Kammer said. We have to talk about inequality and earned citizenship. We have to tell stories of the poor. We need to humanize and put a face on the poor.?

The annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering is co-sponsored by a dozen Catholic organizations, including various departments of the bishops' conference, Catholic Charities USA, JustFaith, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Roundtable Association of Diocesan Social Action Directors, the Catholic Daughters of the Americas, and Catholic Relief Services, among others.

[Cole Stangler is a freelance writer in Washington.]

NCR is covering the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington this week. For short updates throughout the day, be sure to check out Michael Sean Winters' blog **Distinctly Catholic** **[1].** For more lengthy reports, see our continuing story coverage:

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